

## Handwriting

If you read the instructions for authors submitting articles to major academic journals they almost all require you to submit the paper in word processed form – either printed out and mailed to them or, more commonly now, emailed as a word processor or pdf file. Ideally, therefore, if you are going to model the process of writing a review article for a journal as closely as possible in your term papers etc. you should submit word processed documents.

This is not always possible and sometimes you have to submit a handwritten document, either because it is a written exam and the examining authority provides paper rather than word processing facilities or simply because you are told, for some reason, to submit a handwritten paper.

Another reason you might choose to submit a handwritten paper is because there are a lot of diagrams or complicated formatting – for example a written report of a practical or an exam involving a lot of calculations. However, in these cases you may be able to do the parts with complicated formatting such as calculations or diagrams by hand, scan them and include scanned images in your word processed document. I will talk more about scanning documents into word processor files in another chapter.

Whatever the reason, sometimes you have to submit papers that you have handwritten. For those with poor handwriting this can create a lot of concern about how their poor handwriting might impact on their grade.

In general, I have found most examiners to be extremely forgiving of even the poorest handwriting – including those examiners who have beautiful, legible handwriting themselves. As an examiner, you are interested in whether a student has grasped and understood certain facts and concepts. You don't need to be able to read every word in order to be able to ascertain this. My experience has been that even a script with handwriting that is almost impossible to read, with a little persistence on the examiner's part, yields enough information to be able to make this judgement.

*Part of the explanation for this tolerance of poor handwriting may come from recent studies on how people read. Essentially, as long as the first and last letter of the word are decipherable it is often possible to make sense of words and sentences, even if the letters in the middle of the words are jumbled up. Take this as an example:*

Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe.

*from <http://www.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/~mattd/Cmabrigde/>*

Many of the suggestions in this book, and particularly in this section, will help to overcome any potential disadvantage of poor handwriting. Anything that increases the amount of white space and divides blocks of text up into smaller areas makes a script look better and easier to read – poor handwriting or not. So, diagrams, graphs, tables and figures, bullet point lists, subheadings with spaces between sections, and a space of a line or two between paragraphs will all help. I have also seen some exam candidates with poor handwriting adopt a strategy of writing on every second line, which can also help.

Pages with densely packed text and little or no white space from diagrams, tables, lists and so on, even if the handwriting is legible, can be a real heartsink for an examiner as they sigh and plough into yet another featureless, seemingly monotonous script. Even if the content turns out to be excellent, the initial impression created is not a favourable one.

Concentrate on the things you have control over. At this stage in your life the quality of your handwriting is something you probably *don't* have much control over. Neither do you have any control over the examiner's reaction to poor handwriting. You do, however, have control over whether you introduce more white space into your script by using subheadings, figures, tables, lists, spaces between paragraphs and so on.

***Key point:*** *If you have poor handwriting use techniques to create white space to compensate.*

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